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Reflections on Black Internationalism As Strategy

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I am always puzzled by those within the U.S. Left who do not seem to understand the nationalism of the oppressed groups within our own borders, or who view these expressions of nationalist consciousness as a contradiction to the internationalist commitments needed for the fight against global capitalism. Such doctrinaire anti-nationalist positions are not only contrary to the best traditions of the Left, but often increase the potential for the political incorporation of some elements of the anti-nationalist Left into an open or tacit acceptance of the notion of pan-European supremacy, a key element of the postwar social democratic compromise between labor and capital in the metropolitan areas of world capitalism.

If the expansion of a European based world-economy relied in part on the social glue of pan-European supremacy as moral justification for and defense of Euro-North American world hegemony, the path to freedom for oppressed populations required the construction of alternative visions and strategies. The "rise of the dark world," has been a central theme of African American social thought. Since Blacks constituted a numerical minority relegated to second-class citizenship within U.S. society, there was little hope of a strictly "national" solution. Black internationalism thus emerged as articulated in the logic of Du Bois, the New Negro Movement, Paul Robeson, Shirley Graham, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., SNCC, the Black Panther Party and many others. When J. Edgar Hoover said in 1963 that the nation was in the midst of a social revolution with the racial factor at its center, he spoke a truth that would be dramatically reinforced over the next 10-15 years. Despite the accolades given today to Dr. King's dream, there were a good many liberals (now neoconservatives) who shared Hoover's fears about the civil rights movement: that it would ratchet up general dissatisfaction with America leading others not only to support the demands of the Negro, but to seek redress of their own grievances, causing in turn an exponential growth in dissatisfaction with the American social order and the alleged Euro-American cultural foundation of humanity's greatest achievements.

That Hoover located civil rights at the center of the social psychology of rebellion indicates that white opposition to the doctrine of white supremacy is significant for *any* politics of social transformation. The social democratic compromise is implicitly a program of limited inclusion, but the use of pan-European supremacy as an element of the social compromise is a dagger in the heart (or back) of international commitments despite any lip service given to internationalism. This is so because the system of white privilege is a cross-class deal through which middle and working class whites buy into a larger system of inequality and humiliate people of color in the public discourse both with harsh and hateful voices and with smiling faces.

The structural and ideological roots of Black internationalism might be best understood as the strategy of a people who during the 16th-century slave trade were formed as the first international proletariat of the emerging capitalist world-economy (Magubane 1984). Their dispersal, their status in a system of racial slavery, and their position as a racial minority within the borders of the United States meant that they were likely to be more successful in pursuing their grievances if they reached out across national borders to put pressure on the elite strata and the white people of the United States. So a kind of nationalist internationalism was quite typical of Black radicalism in the United States from the 17th century forward.

This movement found allies among a number of groups within the world-system. Often they found supporters in European countries (even though they lacked a substantial internal racialized minority), among people of African descent all over the world, and among radical movements worldwide, some of whom would seize state power in various areas of the world-system. An early example is the 1900 Pan African Congress where Du Bois argued that the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.

Following World War I the Socialist International split and a "revolutionary" segment of the international under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party formed the Third or Communist International. The New Negro Radicals who had formed in the wake of the Great Migration and the Great War moved quickly to ally themselves with the Communist International. Another section of the New Negro movement, lodged among the proletarian nationalists of the Garvey movement, adhered to its own version of Black internationalism often called African Internationalism.

The New Negro radicalism of the post World War I period (Garveyism, the Messenger, the African Blood Brotherhood, the Harlem Renaissance intellectuals and artists,

members of the Communist Party) had been part of the insurrectionary mood of subordinate populations all over the globe. While people of African descent in the U.S. had appealed for international support on other occasions, the social transformations and the social mobilizations of this period fundamentally changed the relationship between Black and white social movements. The urbanization of the Black population had led to the elaboration of Black institutional structures which fostered new movements among the overwhelmingly working class Black population and among its intelligentsia, who had not been able to escape their close link with the Black lower strata, nor the stigma of slavery which looms so large in the collective unconsciousness of the entire nation. The demographic changes and institutional transformations of this era and its relationship to the social psychology of inclusion, solidarity, and egalitarianism made Black agency much more central than heretofore to the process of social change going on within the United States.

That this transformation of the relationship of Blacks to other social groups coincided with the emergence of a world family of antisystemic movements seeking to transform the power relations of the world-system on behalf of the colonized, semi-colonized, dependent, and exploited populations is extremely consequential. Within the New Negro movement there emerged a debate between strategies which emphasized "Race First," often associated in the public mind with the Garveyites, and those which emphasized "Class First," most often associated with A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, and the Messenger Group.

Contrary to the notion of some that Race First Nationalism as practiced by Black activists of this period was a rejection of class analysis, it was actually a rejection of the racial chauvinism of the white Left, in particular that of the Socialist Party. Hubert Harrison, known as the father of Harlem radicalism, had been a member of the Socialist Party since 1909, but resigned in 1914 because of the party's lack of commitment to Black workers and its racist treatment of him. Harrison had criticized a report by a leading party member which alleged that race feelings were a consequence of biological evolution and not social circumstances, and therefore could not be wholly unlearned. The report also argued that "[w]here races struggle for the means of life, racial animosities cannot be avoided. Where working people struggle for jobs, self-preservation enforces its decrees. Economic and political considerations lead to racial fights and to legislation restricting the invasion of the white man's domain by other races" (Harrison 1997: 82).[1]

A section of the Black radicals then decided that it was necessary for Blacks to respond with their own sense of racial solidarity since the socialists were acting on the basis of the naturalness and desirability of white solidarity. Now that support for the Socialist Party had shrunk among the white population, they were coming to Black folk with their hats in their hands, calling for a doctrine of class first. Harrison concludes "We say Race First, because you have all along insisted on Race First and class after when you didn't need our help…" (Harrison 1997: 81).

Just as the white men of these and other lands are white men before they are Christians, Anglo-Saxons, or Republicans; so the Negroes of this and other lands are intent upon being Negroes before they are Christians, Englishmen, or Republicans.

Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Charity begins at home, and our first duty is to ourselves. It is not what we wish but what we must, that we are concerned with….

Striving to be men, and finding no effective aid in government or in politics, the Negro of the Western world must follow the path of the Swadesha movement of India and the Sinn Fein movement of Ireland. The meaning of both these terms is "ourselves first" (Harrison 1997: 40).

Clifton Hawkins adds that Harrison's conversion to the Race First position stemmed not only from the pervasive racism of whites, but also from the defensive race consciousness of Blacks. Hawkins quotes Harrison as saying that "those who grow up behind [the color line] can think of nothing else…" Race, not class, was the organizing principle of American life. By 1916, Hawkins argues, Harrison embraced the *American* [my emphasis] doctrine of Race First (Hawkins, 2000: 51).

Cyril Briggs and the African Blood Brotherhood likewise argued for a Race First stance, but they also sought an engagement with the world Left and with white workers who stood on the side of racial justice. The ABB militants were not dupes of the CPUSA as some have argued but presumed to give leadership. Both Winston James (1998) and Minkah Makalani (2004) argue that the ABB militants who joined the CPUSA in the 1920s felt that they were joining Lenin's international organization and would thereby be able to bring pressure on the CPUSA to follow the directives of the parent organization, particularly the "Theses on the National and Colonial Question" developed as the Second Congress of the Communist International. According to Makalani the ABB moved the Communist International toward its own theoretical formulations. The

"Theses of the Fourth Comintern on the Negro Question" outlined four areas of organizational activity among Blacks in the United States which directly reflected the ABB's organizational program (Makalani, 2004:152).

Notwithstanding the bold moves by the ABB militants to intervene in the workings of the Third International, the CPUSA (Workers Party) increasingly constrained the activities of its Black members, and the dissolution of the ABB itself meant that Blacks in the CPUSA were not able to mount an agenda independent of that of the CPUSA leadership. This was no doubt a much more complicated situation, but in the end the ABB gave up the independent Black leadership that they had previously argued was necessary. What went wrong?

Lenin transcended the doctrinaire "class first" position associated with most socialists in the Pan-European world, but his formulations differed slightly in emphasis from those of M.N. Roy, who captured more accurately the significance of the anti-colonial revolutions for the struggle against world capitalism. Lenin opposed the dismissal of national liberation in the "backward" colonies because whatever the limitations of this movement from the perspective of socialist transformation, it was important for "the working class in the oppressor nations to build an internationalism that opposed their own nationalism and the material interests of their own ruling classes" (Makalani, 2004:133f). In this way the proletarian revolutionaries would demonstrate a genuine commitment to democracy, not one which asked the oppressed nations to put their grievances aside until they are liberated by the coming to power of the socialist movement. But Lenin also argued that the Negro people in the United States constituted an oppressed nation. The representative of the American Communist Party, John Reed, in contrast to Lenin, rearticulated the more traditional class first position. He argued that U.S. Blacks merely sought social equality and, since they were concentrated mostly in the rural south, did not understand their oppression as an extension of the class struggle. The duty of the U.S. Communists should be to redirect the racial consciousness of the Negro people into class consciousness. The presumption of ideological tutelage here is troubling and it undoubtedly reinforced the everyday forms of whiteness characteristic of this group.[2]

M.N. Roy argued for a different relationship between national liberation and class struggle than was generally accepted within international communism and socialism. He argued "that the national liberation of India was central to breaking down the British Empire and capitalism" (Makalani, 2004:137). In contrast to the notion that socialist

revolution would lead automatically to the liberation of the colonies as Engels had argued in 1882, Roy held that it was the existence of the colonies in Asia and Africa which allowed the imperialist bourgeoisie to maintain social control over workers in the metropole, and that it would not therefore be possible to overthrow the capitalist system in Europe without the breaking up of the colonial empire. According to Makalani, Roy's position would have placed the liberation of Africa and Asia (and I would add Blacks in the U.S.) at the center of the world socialist revolution.

During the 1930s and 1940s Black Muslim currents emerged from the remnants of the Garvey movement and Black Islamic tradition, and from contact with Islamic groups from South Asia and the Middle East. These groups were also influenced by the Japanese. On the left, a strong anti-colonial movement formed within the Council of African Affairs led by Paul Robeson, Alphaeus Hunton, and W.E.B. Du Bois and allied with Walter White's NAACP. This movement argued powerfully for the essential linkage between the liberation movements in Africa and Asia and the struggles of the African American people for civil and democratic rights. The repression of Robeson and Du Bois severed this linkage, and was an object lesson to the civil rights mainstream to stay within the parameters of the Cold War consensus.

But the rising tide of decolonization in the post World War II period was to reinforce the radical elements within the African American population who linked civil rights with liberation movements and with radical states such as China, Cuba, Algeria, and Ghana. The modern civil rights movement had been a product of the post-World War II world which gave us both the American Century and decolonization. During this period, movements for national liberation were prominent in every part of the formerly colonized world. The collapse of colonial empires dominated by the British, French, and Dutch gave rise to new nations composed of people of color. While the Japanese defeat of the Russians in 1905, and the Ethiopian defeat of Italy in 1896 were signals of the increasing vulnerability of white power, the postwar decline of world white supremacy seemed to presage the long dreamed "rise of the dark world."*though often combined with forms of Black nationalism,* is central to this effort, and compromise on this position is a dead-end for progressive social change, pure and simple. At the same time, however, to dismiss the nationalist aspirations of those inside our borders as do some elements even among the Black Left is equally unacceptable, not only because dogma is counterproductive but because it undermines the agency of those groups.

At the same time the U.S. had become the new hegemonic power ironically clothing itself in the language of its anti-colonial heritage. To win the allegiance of these new nations of color required that the U.S. eliminate its official sanction of segregation and adopt a posture of support for civil rights. But the collapse of the European empires vindicated the notion of the inevitable rise of the dark world, which was a part of the folklore of the Black working class communities from which Malcolm Little had come, and thus contributed to the mobilization of these communities. So during the flowering of the civil rights movement, Malcolm X was saying that we had arrived at the end of white world supremacy.

While the civil rights movement drew inspiration from the challenge to the white world, they did not develop a position so frankly oppositional. They hoped that their movement might redeem the soul of America. But the movements operated in a common social space, interpenetrated one another, and generated an increasingly powerful internationalist discourse that resonated with other emancipatory voices within the United States and from many parts of the earth. Many viewed the rebellion of the inner cities and the resistance to the increasing violence of U.S. intervention in Vietnam as the onset of a sea change in power relations not only within the United States but on a world scale. This was a remarkable evolution, with a substantial section of the movements arguing for global solidarity with those whom Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the barefoot people of the earth." The agenda was to complete the Great American Revolution, and to transform the American Century into something more akin to a "People's Century."

The triumph of the right in the 1980s was part of a global reversal of these trends, but this was not a sign of strength requiring another retreat of the Left. It should be no mystery that this movement aimed its fire at women, people of color, the underclass, and gays and lesbians. These are precisely sites of greatest resistance and of those dreaming of a new society. Since this was also the period of the rising of the women, it should not be surprising that Black feminists have argued most forcefully for a strategy based on race, class, gender, and sexuality as interlocking forms of oppression. This contribution by Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Rose Brewer and others deepens the contribution of Black internationalism, which is an uncompromising break with the U.S.-centric perspective that the ruling class labored so hard to install across the political spectrum from the Right to the social democratic Left during the postwar period. It was Malcolm X's insight which most effectively demolished the power of that

consensus when he argued that the Negro problem was not simply an American problem or a Black problem, but that it was an issue of the haves against the have-nots on a global scale an issue not of civil rights but of human rights.

Our movement cannot feel defensive about accusations of anti-Americanism. We must stand in solidarity with the oppressed both inside and outside of U.S. borders, value the lives and the aspirations of all the world's peoples, and fight to make this a contending element in our commonsense to counter the U.S.-centric consensus. Black internationalism,

We need to engage collectively in constructing a broad and inclusive revolutionary vision and praxis adequate for the current period of global transition from capitalism. Although we need a sophisticated understanding of social time and thus a mix of short range, medium range and long range strategies, we cannot and should not attempt any kind of shortcut that will (temporarily?) put aside the grievances of the most aggrieved. We should never forget that the agency of those social groups whose critical consciousness has been instilled in them by their own histories and struggles—not only as intellectuals and activists but as people—is absolutely central to building a system that is democratic, egalitarian, and just.

Notes

1. See also Jeffrey Perry (2003) for an extended treatment how Hubert Harrison articulated socialism and race consciousness.

2. Melanie Bush (2004) introduces this term in reference to the racial consciousness of ordinary whites. I apply it here to radical intellectuals.

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